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Watch for New Crape Myrtle Cultivars

August is one of the best months to observe local crape myrtles. These well adapted landscape plants come in a variety of flower colors, plant forms and sizes.

There are a number of new and exciting cultivars that look promising as new shrubs and trees for North Florida. Dynamite? , with true red flowers, is said to have the best red color ever seen. True red flowers have long been a goal of crape myrtle breeders. Dynamite? grows as a stiffly-upright shrub or small tree.

Pink Velour? adds a new dimension to the beauty of crape myrtles with its burgundy -colored new growth. Further north, the burgundy color is said to last all summer, but in North Florida, the foliage fades to a dark green. This cultivar was formerly promoted as "Royal Velvet," but a conflict with a rose having the same name forced the developer to rename it Pink Velour? .

"Fantasy" was first discovered at the Raulston Arboretum in North Carolina. The most outstanding characteristic is its bright orange-red bark. "Fantasy" begins producing white flowers very early in the season. It is a large grower, reaching 50 feet tall or more.

Outstanding new dwarf cultivars are "Sacramento" (with rose pink flowers) and "Houston" (with dark pink flowers). Both have small leaves and a horizontal branching pattern, giving the plants a very fine textured appearance and an almost weeping habit of growth.

"Chickasaw" and "Pocomoke" are new hybrids that, because of their parentage, should be resistant to powdery mildew. Developed at the U.S. National Arboretum in Washington D. C., these new cultivars also have a new and different growth habit. Both are densely branched, with an upright-mounding habit resulting in plants that can be described as cushion like. "Chickasaw" has lavender flowers, while "Pocomoke" flowers are rose

pink in color.

Note to Crape Myrtle Lovers

We are in an enviable position in North Florida because there is much work in progress related to crape myrtle. The North Florida Research and Education Center in Monticello has been collecting data for over 10 years. Dr Gary Knox, Extension Specialist and Professor of Environmental Horticulture, maintains a collection containing 83 different cultivars and 6 species.

Though growing at the research center, these plants are maintained under conditions that are very similar to residential landscape plantings. Information obtained from the plantings is regularly shared with Extension agents and the general public.

Several commercial plant nurseries across North Florida specialize in crape myrtle production and new cultivars are showing up on a regular basis. Most of the larger specialty nurseries are wholesale only - selling to retail nurseries and garden centers.

Check retail plant offerings during the summer. Some of the newer crapemyrtles are likely to show up!

Question of the Week: One of my shrub beds has become so weedy that I am having a difficult time with it. I have been told to use black plastic film on the soil surface, and then cover it with mulch. Is this a recommended method of controlling weeds in shrub beds?

Answer: No, though plastic film would prevent most weeds from emerging, it blocks air and water penetration to the root system. A weed barrier is not recommended between the soil surface and the mulch unless you feel that it is absolutely necessary. If so, choose one of the weed barrier fabrics that allow the soil to breathe and that allow water to pass through. There are several woven and non-woven products for this purpose on the market.